

Just sitting in the backyard, looking up.

October 8th, 2010 § [Leave a Comment](#)

300 WORDS A DAY

FOLLOWING JESUS

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***T** HIS WEEK I'VE READ THROUGH **PSALM 19**. DECADES AGO I HAD PART memorized, as part of a song, but it has been awhile. I decided to let you look at it over the weekend. Consider the poetry, the metaphor, the passion that David shows.*

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.

In the heavens he has pitched a tent for the sun, which is like a bridegroom coming forth from his pavilion, like a champion rejoicing to run his course. It rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other; nothing is hidden from its heat.

The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes. The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous.

They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb.

By them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.

Who can discern his errors? Forgive my hidden faults. Keep your servant also from willful sins; may they not rule over me. Then will I be blameless, innocent of great transgression.

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.

If it may please you.

October 7th, 2010 § [2 Comments](#)

Y ESTERDAY MORNING I SENT A SENTENCE FROM THE BIBLE TO A FRIEND.

I

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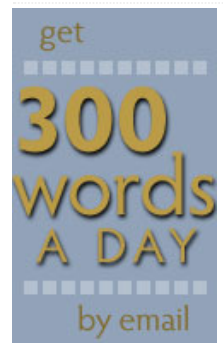
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*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be
pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.*

It's from **Psalms 19**, a prayer that David wrote out. I sent it to someone who was speaking somewhere yesterday. Then I thought, "I need to keep that in mind."

So I tried.

It was challenging. There were moments in the day that went crazy. Several people asking questions, each before the previous question was answered or problem was solved. There were moments when I started to feel a bit cranky, a bit defensive. There were moments when I started wondering about the projects I wasn't getting done, or the value of the ones I was working on. There was a stretch where nothing was working on one of the extra projects that had been added to my day.

But I kept coming back to that sentence, saying it out loud, considering it in my heart.

- Sometimes, I was looking for affirmation from God, the way I show a boss how I'm doing a project: "Would you let me know if this is going the way you want?"
- Sometimes, I was wanting to *get* thoughts and words because, following a short sleep the previous night, my capacity to meditate (to reflect and ponder and consider and chew) was negligible.
- Sometimes, I was making an offering, kind of like writing a poem or a post and giving it with a "here's what I'm thinking. I hope you like it."

As I neared the end of the day, with only a bit more writing and teaching to do, I realized that I had spent much time in conscious conversation with God.

I think the prayer was answered.

—

For more on reflective scripture reading and prayer, see "**the heart of lectio divina**."

Concrete.

October 6th, 2010 § 1 Comment

PHIL COOKE TALKED THE OTHER DAY ABOUT THE NEED FOR LEADERS TO BE concrete.

In short, start in the world of abstraction, but to reach your team, move quickly into the real world. Give them examples, illustrations, and real-life explanations that will help them understand your concept.

After I read that, I spent the day thinking a discussion I'll have about Paul and humility and a letter he wrote to friends in Philippi with my Wednesday

prayer purpose
reading relationship
rest sabbath shepherd
sin suffering teaching
temptation testing trust
waiting

CATEGORY CLOUD

belief bible reading
character commands
fasting following forgiving
John justice kingdom lent
light love notPaul pmerrill
prayer psalms
questions
review sabbath steps
suffering telling trust
worship

night group of friends. I wrestled with what concrete could look like for our discussion.

I read a familiar text:

*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. (**Philippians 2:3**)*

It's a phrase that gets preached a lot. It's a platitude that gets inflicted a lot. But what does it really mean to be humble? What does it look like? What counts?

And I read on:

*Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. (**Philippians 2:4**)*

"All good," I think. "That's pretty clear. Good business looks at each situation as a win-win. If I help others, they will help me. I'm comfortable with that. That seems pretty concrete."

But Paul was afraid that what he was saying might be comfortable, convenient, open to self-helping interpretation. So he decided to make "humble" very concrete:

*Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:
Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped
but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness. (**Philippians 2:5-7**)*

Bam.

If I want to understand humble, I can't look at how serving I am. It starts with how serving Jesus was.

Paul shows the power of a concrete example.

Now in 3-D.

October 5th, 2010 § 6 Comments

I READ AN ARTICLE IN **TECHNOLOGIES FOR WORSHIP** ABOUT **3D TECHNOLOGY** IN church settings. It is a good article. The author considers the cost of the technology, the challenges of doing it well, the differences between wearing glasses in a movie theatre and wearing glasses in a church service.

As I looked at the headline and as I read the article, I was convicted.

I understand desiring the best possible imagery in large gatherings. I understand the struggle to involve the people in the back of a large room in

what is happening in the front of the room. I understand working to create meaningful worship experiences.

But I started thinking that if I truly want to create meaningful 3D experiences, I need to pour way more energy than I am into a living a biblical sounding word for 3D: *incarnation*.

Jesus could, I suppose, developed a better camera to project the quality of his love. Instead, he wrapped himself in a body. A 3D body. Complete with sweat and stink and touch and texture. **John says**, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” John talks about Jesus **and says**, “which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched...” There is about Jesus, about the stories of his hunger and hands on children and hiking and halting howling wind, a remarkable tangibility.

In a sense, this tangibility stands in contrast to the efforts to create three dimensions on screens in places of worship. Do you want to see a finger leaping from the screen or feel the arm of a friend around your shoulder as you weep?

I know. A place for both. But I wanna be the latter. Which is the point of incarnation.

An intention audit.

October 4th, 2010 § 4 Comments

OVER THE WEEKEND, I HAD SOME FRIENDS DO AN EXERCISE. WE WERE talking about living like Jesus. I asked them to make some lists.

- List the last five television programs you watched.
- List the last five conversations you had.
- List what you read the last time you spent fifteen minutes reading.
- List the last five people you helped.
- Outline the last 15 minutes you spent online or listening to the radio.
- List the last \$150 you spent.

Now, ask yourself these questions:

- Which of those actions clearly bothers God?
(Not some standard of measuring up to what God wants, mind you. So the best way to figure out this one is probably to ask him: “Does it bother you when I watch this?” (We’d ask a friend sitting on the sofa next to us, right?) “When I talk with that person, and we talk about that subject, I bet it gets on your nerves, doesn’t it. Sorry. I never thought of it that way.”)
- Which of that content clearly disagrees with God? (Sometimes it takes discernment. Sometimes, it just takes thinking about it for a second.)
- What about those uses of time would you like to change? (I bet you think that I’m being critical. But I’m not. Maybe you want to do more of something rather than less.)
- Which of those choices reflect habits that could be refined. (We’ve talked before about **the idea of growing**, of taking intentional steps

to improve. What habits do you want to be better in?

- Which of those actions was the result of choices to follow Jesus that you made sometime in the past? (What if we actually are making decisions that reflect decisions Jesus would make? What if we are making progress?)

Want encouragement? You can still write the list for the next week.

Impatient

October 1st, 2010 § 2 Comments

(**PAUL MERRILL** WRITES HERE EVERY *FIRST FRIDAY*.)

I grew up hearing the phrase, “in ‘the fullness of time’ “. That’s found in **Galatians 4:4** in the King James Version of the Bible – a translation that is no longer commonly used. (The English language has changed a lot since 1611.)

In my favorite translation (the New Living), **that passage reads**, “...when the right time came...” And you have to hear the rest, “God sent his Son...” God sent Jesus to the earth at the **exact** time He had planned. God’s followers, the Jews, were looking for the promised Messiah ever since prophets had mentioned that He would be coming – many, many years before then.

Those who follow Jesus now are looking for His physical second coming to this planet. No one knows when that will be, though many have set a date and it passed. But exploring that is not my purpose in writing today.

Let’s think about God’s timing. It’s often, or shall we say, **normally** different than what our choice of timing would be.

A good friend has been a pastor in a small town for many years. Within the first few months, he and his wife discovered that living there would be a challenge. He began looking for a new position after about two years. God had different timing. They found a new position in a very different location and will move there in early November. This is *several* years after they wanted to move on.

I could go on about all the lessons they learned living there. I won’t. It was **really** hard for them to wait. It was hard to knock on doors and not see them open. It was hard to imagine how life would be nicer in another town.

As you wait, remember that God knows. He has a plan.

Living the adverb life.

September 30th, 2010 § 5 Comments

I WAS THINKING THE OTHER AFTERNOON ABOUT THE NUMBER OF TIMES THAT

people around me wonder what God wants them to do. And I thought, “Maybe we should be thinking about **how** to do the things that we are already doing.”

I was thinking that we often spend time wondering where God wants us to go. And I thought, “Maybe we should be thinking about **how** to live where I am.”

I was thinking that we often ask God who he wants us to talk to. I thought, “Maybe we should be thinking about **how** to talk to the people we already know.”

I thought about all the times that Jesus talked about loving each other, and the implication is not that we spend lots of time going and looking for new “each others” to love, but that we look at the people we are already with, the people that we are stuck with, and that we love them. (If that sentence was too complicated, try this: love the ones you’re with.)

I thought about Paul talking about learning **to be content** and Jesus talking about **not worrying**. I thought about how often Paul seems to be talking about **how** to live wherever you are living, and **how** to live whatever you are doing and **how** to live with whoever and **how** to live whenever you are living.

Here’s what I’m wondering.

I’m wondering if God calls us to **live adverbial lives**: to live compassionately and kindly and humbly and gently and patiently and forgivingly and lovingly and peacefully and thankfully and wisely and songfully. That’s what Paul lists right before saying this:

And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

If you were going to follow Jesus, what would you pack?

September 29th, 2010 § 10 Comments

SOMETIMES I ASK QUESTIONS BEFORE I KNOW THE ANSWER.

I was working on a study guide for a couple groups I work with. I wrote the question in the title of this post. And then I started my answer.

- ~~Pen~~-Sharpie.
- Blank paper.

And then I had to take my answer apart.

When I was asking the question, I wasn’t thinking about following like sitting and taking notes. I was thinking more about what tools I would take if I was going to follow along and work with Jesus.

I mean, some people would grab a toolbelt. They'd check for their hammer, make sure the pliers were in the little pouch for pliers, that there were screwdrivers in the appropriate loops. For those people, following looks like fixing walls that hurricanes have blasted through.

Some people would grab brown paper bags and clear baggies. They would check the shelves for knives and peanut butter and loaves of bread. For those people, following looks like **feeding people** just like Jesus did.

Some people would make sure they had their pneumatic wrench and floor jack for fixing the cars of single moms not getting child support who can't afford rent let alone car repairs. For those people, following looks like caring for **widows and orphans**.

Some people, on their way out the door, would grab a briefcase of scrapbooking paper or a set of Bible commentaries or a handful of crayons or a calculator. Sympathy cards and sermons and crafts with kids and responsible church finances all matter.

The other day I started helping a guy think through college choices. I almost wrote on the wall with the marker in my pocket, outlining options. Instead, I dragged him to my office.

So, what's in your pack, as you head off, following Jesus?

voices outside our head

September 28th, 2010 § 4 Comments

MY WRITING GROWS, IN PART, OUT OF MY LIFE. AS A RESULT, IT OFTEN reveals more of the condition of my heart than I intend. I write what's fresh in my reading and thinking. I write a day at a time.

I am inside my head, living on the ground. Those of you outside my head are often able to be more objective about what is happening to me. You are able to see patterns.

It happened again last week. A friend pointed out a pattern in my writing, a pattern in my heart. I hadn't seen it yet, not clearly. I had glimpses, of course, but I hadn't linked the pieces together.

And once he pointed out this pattern, I was able to tie it back to a realization and to a decision. And I saw a little bit of progress in my heart.

The writer of **Hebrews says**,

"And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching."

Lots of people use that as support for going to church services. "See?" the argument goes. "We are supposed to be in church every time the doors

open and if we aren't, we're going against what the Bible says."

The text seems to be less about Sunday morning worship services and more about relationships. The kind of relationships with other people following Jesus that will poke and prod and reveal and comfort and challenge and affirm. The kind of relationships that come from regular open-hearted interaction. The friend that pointed out the pattern helped me more than he knows. Til now, of course.

yes, I know.

September 27th, 2010 § 2 Comments

I KNOW THAT TECHNICALLY IT IS FALL. AT LEAST IN THE NORTHERN HEMISPHERE.

I know that it is almost the end of September, the end of the first three-quarters of 2010.

I know that there is a huge amount left undone so far this year.

I know that there are many things that can still be done this year.

I know that years are irrelevant by themselves, but they serve as markers, as external evidence that time is passing.

I know that I can talk at length about paring activities, about resting, about trusting, but that until I do it, all the talking about it is irrelevant. I know that is part of what James meant when **he said**, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says."

I know that to say, "That was a great sermon yesterday" or even to have preached that sermon or taught that lesson is all very nice, but unless it connects to some action of some sort (other than looking for some other sermon or teaching another lesson), the comment or the teaching isn't terribly worthwhile.

I know that the response to the list of things that I know is not to say, "I will buckle down and do even more."

Actually, I know that is one response.

However, I know that a far more effective response is to say, "So God. It's Monday. Can I go to work with you today? Because I've heard that it's 'take your child to work' day. Somewhere it has to be." And I'd way rather go to work with you than go anywhere else without you. And I'm tired of coming up with the "Make God Happy" to-do list. I keep missing. So can I please work with you?"

Thank you.
